

FUN AND GAMES in Early America

Just as they are for today's children, games and sports were an important part of the lives of children growing up before 1492. Native American kids—and adults, too—enjoyed a variety of games and sports. But they weren't just pastimes: they also taught life lessons and skills. Games and sports were for everyone: men, women, children, and the elderly. Some games were played by one person, and others were

team sports that could include an entire village.

More Than Child's Play

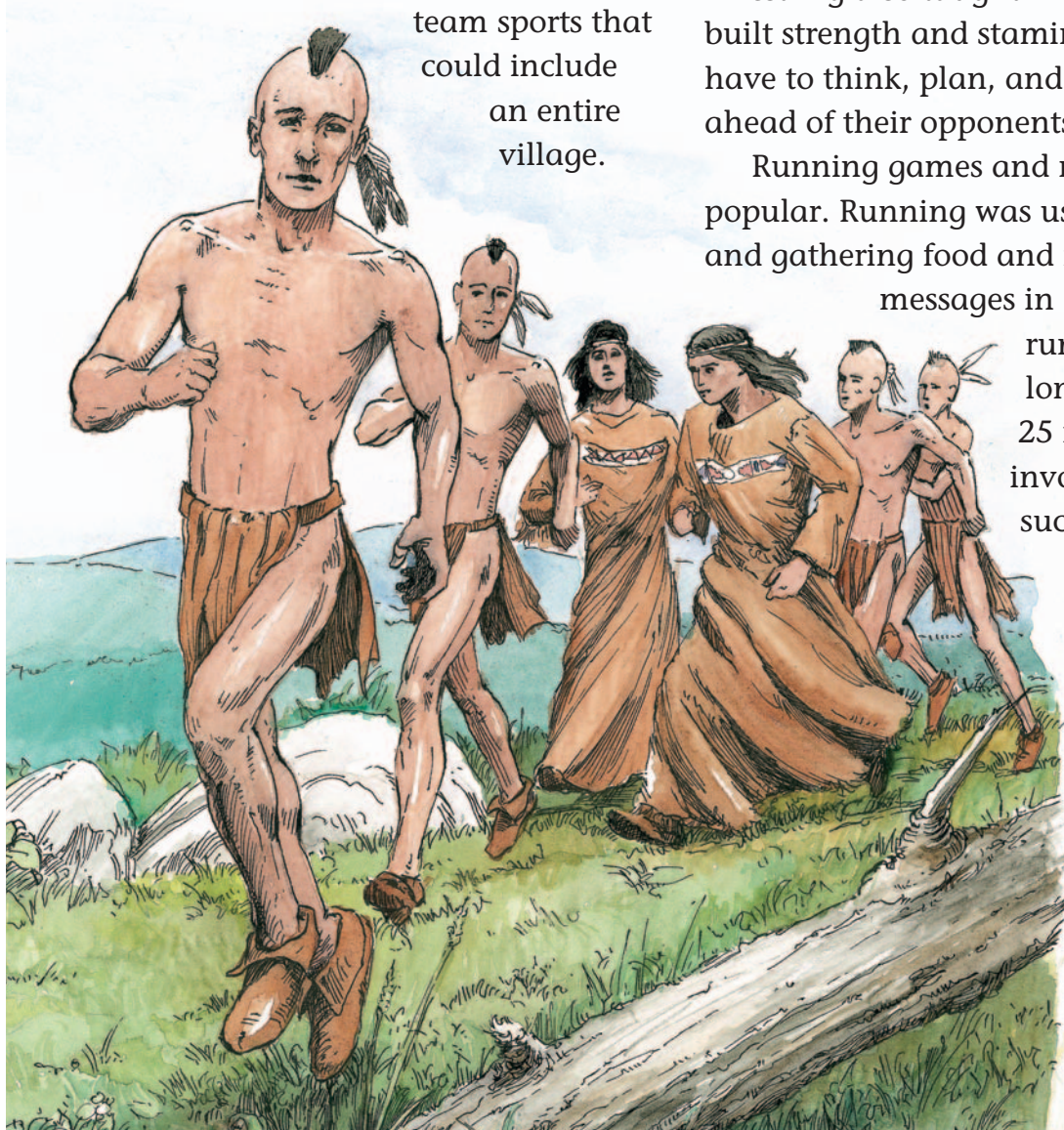
Through play, children learned valuable skills. Many children's games mimicked adult behavior, such as hunting and stalking. Practicing silent footsteps and quiet breathing while sneaking up on someone was fun, and it trained children to be good hunters. (Haven't you had fun sneaking up on a friend or parent?) Wrestling also taught important lessons and built strength and stamina. Good wrestlers have to think, plan, and stay one move ahead of their opponents.

Running games and races were popular. Running was useful for hunting and gathering food and for delivering

messages in a hurry. Races were

run over short and long distances—up to 25 miles—and often involved obstacles such as trees or rivers.

For some races, children had to spin around, then run while dizzy! These runners improved their balance as well as their speed and endurance.



Teamwork and Sportsmanship

Groups of children played many different sports. Team sports included everyone, regardless of their skill level. Teams played to win, but fair play and sportsmanship were just as important as winning. Many games had judges, but individual players were expected to play fairly. Poor sports and cheaters were punished.

Ball games were popular with some groups, who made balls out of carved bone or wood. Sometimes small pieces of animal skins were stitched together and stuffed to make a ball. Most ball games involved hitting or kicking the ball. While sportsmanship was important, games were rough and rules were few. Women and girls often played separately from men and boys.

Early Field Hockey

A popular team sport for women and girls was shinny. Using sticks that looked a bit like modern hockey sticks, the players tried to move a ball down the field to score a goal. Players had to work as a team to be successful. Shinny also could be rough sometimes.

Lacrosse, the “Little War”

In many areas, lacrosse was the most popular sport for men and boys. It was played by two opposing teams. The teams could have any number of players—from a few dozen to a few hundred—as long as each team had the

same number. Each player had a stick with a scoop-shaped woven basket at one end. Using these basket-sticks, teammates passed a ball down the field and tried to score a goal. Lacrosse was a physically demanding and intense game. The Cherokee called it “little war.” Players were allowed to pull hair, hit each other with their stick, and even wrestle.

Six hundred years ago, kids played tug-of-war and guessing games. They traded with each other and competed for the best prizes. Boys and girls played together and separately, having fun and learning skills they would use when they grew up. Many games we play today—lacrosse, baseball, hockey, and soccer—came from Native American sports. Rough-and-tumble competition, yes. But teamwork and cooperation are an equally important part of the legacy of these first American games.

**Adapted from an article by Kelsie Ingham
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